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Delegitimization, Recontextualization, and (Re)Framing Processes

A Study of the Coverage of a ‘Populist’ Representative by a ‘Populist’ Talk Show

Abstract

This paper analyzes the coverage of Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, an American politician whose political discourse has aligned her with left-wing populism (LWP), by Tucker Carlson Tonight, a Fox News talk show hosted by a political commentator whose views have aligned him with right-wing populism (RWP). It explores the mechanisms that govern the presentation, interpretation, and framing of the antagonistic opponent via the analysis of delegitimization strategies, recontextualizing principles, and (re)framing processes. Findings suggest that the antagonist is delegitimized with ironic formulations, ad hominem attacks and debasing attributions that cast doubts on her authority and expertise. Recontextualization involves the suppression and concealment of the antagonist’s standpoints and underlying ideologies, and reframing occurs in discourse surrounding racism based on whom is the (perceived) recipient of racism. While many of the strategies employed are emblematic of populist discourse, others connote ageism, sexism, and racism expressed in overt and covert ways.

Keywords: *delegitimization strategies, Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), ideological discourse, framing, recontextualizing principles*

In 2018, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez shocked the establishment when she unseated a 10-term incumbent in New York’s 14th congressional district (NY14) primary election and subsequently became the youngest female Congressperson in American history. With a platform that champions progressive policies and disparages contemporary capitalism, Ocasio-Cortez has become a magnetic, polarizing figure in the US political landscape who is at once one of the most visible symbols of progressive, left-wing populism (LWP) and one of the most persistent targets of attacks by the right. In early 2019 it was reported that Fox News, the mainstream media bastion of American conservatism and right-wing populism (RWP), mentioned Ocasio-Cortez over three thousand times in just six weeks (Hagle 2019).

This study delves into this staggering statistic by focusing on one of these Fox News shows, *Tucker Carlson Tonight (TCT)*, hosted by Tucker Carlson, the “Populist Paladin of Primetime” (Crawford 2018). Specifically, it aims to explore the mechanisms that govern the presentation, interpretation and framing of the antagonistic opponent via analysis of the delegitimization strategies, recontextualizing principles, and (re)framing processes enacted in the coverage of Representative Ocasio-Cortez on selected *TCT* segments.

1. A definition of populism: the left/right nexus

A widely-cited definition of populism is provided by Cas Mudde: “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (2004, 543). Populist political parties and movements—whether (radical) right or left—construct an antagonistic opposition between “the people”—identified as sovereign, “the common people” or as “a nation”—and “the elite”—those who have accumulated political, economic, and/or media power—according to their specific ideological outlook (Macaulay 2019; see also De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon 2018). Based on a comparison of LWP and RWP in the UK, March (2017) observed a “two-dimensional exclusion”: the afore-described vertical one between “the people” and “the elite,” which transpired on both sides of the political spectrum, and a horizontal exclusion between “the people” and “dangerous others,” which emerged only in RWP (March 2017, 298). Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) additionally specify that populism as an ideology is “thin-centered.” Porous and malleable, it is almost always combined with a host ideology, such as nationalism in RWP, and socialism in LWP. March (2017) found strong support for the “ideology-trumps-populism thesis;” that is, the host ideology may have more explanatory power than populism *per se*.

The following sections each center on Representative Ocasio-Cortez and Tucker Carlson, with the aim of disclosing relevant aspects of their biographies and production to situate them as populists.

1.1 Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was born into a Puerto Rican, working-class family in the Bronx in 1989. Although she worked at an educational nonprofit organization, interned in Senator Ted Kennedy’s office, and volunteered on Bernie Sanders’ 2016 presidential campaign, her tenure as a waitress and bartender in Manhattan is her most cited employment experience before her campaign for the Democratic nomination to represent NY14 in Congress. Ocasio-

Cortez, also known as AOC, was largely unknown in political circles before obtaining the support of the progressive political action committee Justice Democrats and announcing her primary campaign in May 2017 at merely 27 years of age. Emblematized by her campaign hashtag #OneOfUs, Ocasio-Cortez's Twitter feed developed a campaign narrative of a non-establishment candidate who 'actually' lived in her district, took public transportation, refused corporate donations, and foregrounded the needs of her community. This narrative served to frame her adversary as a member of the out-of-touch, profiteering Washington establishment. In a campaign video released in May 2018, Ocasio-Cortez structures an 'us' *versus* 'them' binary: "This race is about people versus money. We've got people, they've got money." As Georgiou (2020) maintains, the opposition emblematic of populism that Ocasio-Cortez constructs is one based primarily on class, in line with her social-democratic views. Her personal narrative as a working-class Bronxite with deep ties to her community situated her as one of 'us' ('the people') fighting for the working class against an incumbent slated to become the next Speaker of the House. In this light, her surprising primary win could be viewed as marking a victory of 'the people' (the diverse working-class community of her district) against a member of 'the elite' (a finance-driven and indisputably key component of the governing class).

As the youngest female US Representative in American history, since January 2019, Ocasio-Cortez has not veered from her narrative. She has condemned actions by the Trump administration that have threatened social justice, and she has taken a vociferous stand against powerful businessmen, most notably the CEOs of Facebook and Amazon, thereby chastising 'the elite' of political, economic, and media realms. Her painstakingly curated social media presence is replete with personalization, and her remarkable social media clout (4.2 million Instagram followers; 6.2 million Twitter followers)¹ is representative of her amplified reach and popularity. The Representative's calls for direct constituent participation *via* these networks—such as when she crowdsourced questions for Mark Zuckerberg on Twitter in October 2019—can be interpreted as a characteristic move of populist actors who support the "implementation of direct democratic mechanisms" and the institution of a more immediate (and even unmediated) relationship between the people and their leaders (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 16; see also Macaulay 2019). The use and institution of these popular channels has allowed Ocasio-Cortez to cast herself not only as a representative of but also as the voice of the people.

¹ Figures as of 20 January 2020.

1.2 TCT and its host

TCT is an American talk show featuring political and current events commentary. The host of the show, Tucker Carlson, has appeared on television as a political commentator for over two decades. Although he was associated with libertarian views at the onset of his career, Carlson is today seen as a conspicuous proponent of RWP. However, he is an unlikely candidate for such a role. Born in 1969 and raised in California, Carlson went to a private boarding school before attending a selective liberal arts university in Connecticut. Carlson himself has resisted the populist label (MacDougald 2019), but its appropriateness is undeniable when perusing his 2018 book *Ship of Fools: How a Selfish Ruling Class is Bringing America to the Brink of Revolution*, a *New York Times* bestseller. Here, as the title of the work suggests, Carlson offers an unflattering account of the American ruling elite. Just in the introduction to the book, Carlson's critique, which cuts across major party lines, details the "many disasters America's leaders created" including the Iraq war, Wall Street bailouts, the collapse of the manufacturing sector, the opening of US borders, and the death of the middle class (Carlson 2018, 3). To Carlson, Donald Trump's election was "a throbbing middle finger in the face of America's ruling class" after "decades of selfish and unwise decisions made by selfish and unwise leaders" (2018, 3). He later adds: "our new ruling class doesn't care, not simply about American citizens, but about the future of the country itself" (2018, 14-15). These trenchant attacks constitute one of the key elements of populist rhetoric: vilifying 'the elite' (the ruling class) for not safeguarding the wellbeing of the people (the middle class; American citizens) and, by extension, for going against the interests of the nation.

In line with the findings on RWP reported in March (2017), in addition to the vertical people-elite exclusion, evidence of a horizontal exclusion between 'the people' and 'dangerous others' also emerges in the introduction to Carlson's book. Embedded within a nationalist and xenophobic ideology, he charges that the ruling elite "allowed 15 million illegal immigrants to enter the United States, get jobs, and use public services in a country they are not legally allowed to live in" (2018, 9). Illegal immigrants fundamentally altered the fabric of the United States, "a nation that was overwhelmingly European, Christian, and English-speaking fifty years ago" (2018, 10), which led Carlson to argue: "why should a country with no shared language, ethnicity, religion, culture, or history remain a country?" (2018, 10). Not only have immigrants taken Americans' jobs and resources, but their arrival has stripped the nation of its identity. Carlson paints a glib future scenario in which the predicted replacement of low-skilled jobs by automation results in unemployed, "angry and disenfranchised" immigrants. "Things could get volatile," he warns (2018, 11). Thus, the welfare of an ethnically-defined 'people' (a

subgroup constituted by ‘European, Christian, and English-speaking’) is threatened by ‘dangerous others’ (*illegal* immigrants) whose arrival is facilitated by ‘the elite’ (policy- and lawmakers).

Many of the messages embedded within his book recur in *TCT*. The show premiered in 2016 and airs weekdays at the coveted prime time 8 pm slot on Fox News, a cable news network whose audience is primarily conservative, Republican, and non-Hispanic white (Gramlich 2020). Its dedicated website describes *TCT* as “the sworn enemy of lying, pomposity, smugness and group think.” In November 2019, *TCT* was the second highest-rated show in American cable news, with an average of 3.4 million nightly viewers (Joyella 2019).

The present study analyzes selected news segments of *TCT* that feature the coverage of Representative Ocasio-Cortez, thereby studying the RWP-LWP nexus. This paper has three primary research aims: a) to unearth the strategies utilized on *TCT* to present negatively and delegitimize Ocasio-Cortez; b) to disclose the recontextualization and argumentation strategies employed to represent and (re)interpret Ocasio-Cortez’s words; c) to explore reframing processes in selected *TCT* segments.

2. Methodology

The analysis of the coverage of a social actor whose political discourse aligns her with LWP on a talk show hosted by a political commentator whose views align him with RWP requires a critical lens. The critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach applied in this study is the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) (Reisigl and Wodak 2001; 2009). It was selected because of its insightful applications to the study of racist rhetoric (Reisigl and Wodak 2001) and RWP discourse (Wodak 2015), and its emphasis on the historical dimension, intertextuality, and interdiscursivity, and “on ways in which power-dependent semiotic means are used to construct positive self- and negative other-presentations” (Wodak 2015, 52).

This section details the data collection method before describing the data analysis procedure in greater detail.

2.1 Data Collection

The six *TCT* segments selected were the most viewed ones that featured the Representative among those available on the official Fox News YouTube channel. To retrieve these videos, a search on the official channel for the Representative’s name (*AOC* or *Ocasio-Cortez*) was performed. Instances in which other individuals were the primary focus of the segment were

excluded. An overview of the resulting segments appears in Table 1. The numeration, by chronological order, is used to reference each segment throughout the paper.

	Title on Fox News YouTube channel	Guest	Date	YouTube views²
1	Professor explains 'the Ocasio-Cortez effect' on campuses	Nicholas Giordano	12/02/2019	530,000
2	Ocasio-Cortez lashes out at unflattering likability poll	None	19/03/2019	2,690,000
3	Tucker: AOC has the cure for human extinction	None	01/04/2019	500,000
4	Ocasio-Cortez mocked for 'accent' at Sharpton event	Mark Steyn	08/04/2019	770,000
5	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez joins the war on cauliflower	Cathy Areu	24/05/2019	860,000
6	Tucker: A plea to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez	None	30/10/2019	1,030,000

Tab. 1: Selected segments

Three segments were monologues and three featured guests, including Political Science professor at Suffolk Community College and creator of the PAS Report Nicholas Giordano, conservative author and columnist Mark Steyn, and Cathy Areu, the founder of *Catalina* magazine. The average segment length was slightly under five minutes.

Once the segments were selected, the speech (by Carlson, the pundits and excerpted political discourse by third parties) was transcribed (6246 tokens), and salient nonverbal cues were noted. The lower thirds or chyrons, a graphic element that appears in the lower area of the screen with concise statements that highlight/summarize the news story presented, were also transcribed. Next, screenshots were taken of the over the shoulder graphics (OTS),³ which appear on the right of the anchor, and usually include an image or icon, and are linked with the news story presented. Lastly, the source or type, date, topic, and context of the thirteen excerpts of the interviews, posts, hearings, and speeches featuring Representative Ocasio-Cortez that were cited in the selected segments of *TCT* were retrieved and categorized.

² Views as of 20/01/2020, rounded to the nearest ten thousand.

³ Research on how viewers process and recall messages in news broadcasts revealed that more than a quarter of fixation time was dedicated to elements outside of the anchor, namely the ticker, lower thirds, and OTS graphic (Rodrigues, Veloso and Mealha 2016). *TCT* does not feature a ticker so only the latter two elements were considered.

2.2 Data Analysis

The present study applied the DHA framework of five discursive positive self and negative other representation macro-strategies: nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification/mitigation (Reisigl and Wodak 2009). In order to achieve a higher level of methodological granularity and in line with Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) recommendation to combine various methods within DHA, additional methods were heeded. The discussion that follows is divided by research aim for simplicity, although the different methods of analysis cut across aims.

To explore the first aim of the study, or the strategies utilized on *TCT* to negatively present and delegitimize Ocasio-Cortez, in addition to the aforementioned strategies, the analysis was also informed by classification and appraisal (Van Leeuwen 1996) and Van Dijk's (1993; 2000; 2006) strategies of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. It also drew on the strategies of legitimation detailed in Van Leeuwen (2007), and expanded on in Reyes (2011), to delve into delegitimization, or "discursively creating and transmitting a negative image of the Other" (Screti 2013, 212).

The second aim of the study was primarily concerned with examining how excerpts of political discourse were taken out of their original context (de-contextualized) and inserted into the new context (re-contextualized) of *TCT*, or their recontextualization (Wodak and Fairclough 2010; see also re-entextualization in Varis and Blommaert 2015). To explain how elements of social events are selectively 'filtered' in representations across contexts, Fairclough (2003, 139) expanded an existing framework to develop the following "recontextualizing principles," which were used as an interpretative key in the present study: the exclusion/inclusion and foregrounding/backgrounding of elements (presence); the degree of abstraction/generalization (abstraction); the order of representation (arrangement); and additions in representing events including explanation/legitimations and evaluations (additions). In this study, particular attention was paid to the contradictions and paradoxes as well as the ideological purposes of new frames and different meaning outcomes that recontextualization processes occasion.

In a related vein, the third aim of the study was to explore the reframing processes in the coverage of an antagonist on *TCT*. Goffman developed frames—or "definitions of a situation [...] built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events [...] and our subjective involvement in them" (1974, 10)—as a framework that could be applied to answer the question "What is it that's going on here?" (1974, 8). Frames can be examined as multiple and negotiable interpretive universes and interactional achievements within which interlocutors can shift footing (Sclafani 2018).

The following section, divided into three subsections in accordance with the three aims of this study, unearths the findings of the study.

3. Delegitimization, recontextualization, and (re)framing processes

3.1 *Strategies of negative other-presentation and delegitimization*

This section details the mechanisms used across all six *TCT* segments by the host and his guests to represent the antagonistic opposition primarily in terms of negative other-presentation and (de)legitimization.

A recurrent strategy applied on *TCT* triggers an ironic Manichean division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and involves naming Tucker Carlson and *TCT* viewers as ‘bad’ and Ocasio-Cortez as ‘good,’ as illustrated in the examples that follow:

- (1) You’ve heard her say what matters is that **she is a really good person and you’re not**. (Tucker Carlson (TC), seg.1)⁴
- (2) **You sir are a bigot** and Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez condemns you. **She by contrast is morally right** and utterly certain of it. (TC, seg.2)
- (3) Well that’s the difference between you and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. **She is a highly decent person**. (TC, seg.3)

Positively connotated evaluative terms used to describe Ocasio-Cortez are accompanied by stilted modifiers (e.g. “really,” “morally,” “utterly,” “highly”) that function within the process of ironic counter-coding to create hyperboles and overstatements that reverse significances (Nash 1985). Although this formulation, combined with the context in which it appears, renders the propositions unserious and, ultimately, ironic, Nash (1985) described that ironic utterances require a ‘truth condition’ for their ironic supposition constituted by acknowledged facts and accepted attitudes. In this light, due to the “cognitive mobilization”—or a process that “has led citizens to stop accepting that the elites think for them, and to no longer blindly swallow what the elites tell them” (Mudde 2004, 554) that has not only facilitated but also activated populist attitudes (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017) –, this constructed *TCT* viewers *versus* Ocasio-Cortez (‘us’/‘her’) dichotomy can be interpreted as a manifestation of this anti-elitist sentiment. As framed on *TCT*, the Representative, one of ‘the elite,’ may believe/affirm that she is (does/proposes policies that are) “good” and “right” and “decent” (and even be “utterly certain of it”), but this is not accepted and is even discursively refuted.

⁴ Emphases (bold) are mine in all examples.

A similar refutation process also transpires in the attempt to undermine the legitimacy that the Representative accrues by her institutional role, which both legitimizes her actions and assigns to her authority, expertise, and credibility (Van Leeuwen 2007; Reyes 2011). The *TCT* segments analyzed in this study reveal attempts to chip away at the Representative's legitimacy *via* the use of referential and predicational strategies (Reisigl and Wodak 2001). The first group of negatively connoted attributions under study denote mental deficiency, as shown in the following examples, all uttered by the host:

- (4) So not only [is Ocasio-Cortez] **dumb and totally ignorant of everything** but utterly self-assured. (TC, seg.1)
- (5) Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is a **moron**. (TC, seg.3)
- (6) Even adjusting for the fact she's **dumb, which she obviously is** (TC, seg.5)

The use of these debasing nominations and evaluations deny Ocasio-Cortez's intellectual capacities and call into question her ability to govern. Relatedly, the logic and clarity of the Representative's (often ideological) propositions is also questioned by means of attributing to her and her proposed legislation the traits of incoherence and unintelligibility,⁵ as seen in the bolded phrases in the following segment 1 excerpt, in which *TCT* guest Nicholas Giordano (NG) speaks of the Green New Deal, Ocasio-Cortez's first piece of legislation co-sponsored with Senator Markey that aimed to combat climate change:

- (7) TC: So there's this certain recognizable syndrome here where the people who know the least are the most self-confident. Where does that come from?
 NG: Well, it's the lack of critical thinking that exists. It's the superficial arguments they make that are completely unrealistic. If you look at the Green New Deal, **it's incomprehensible** [...] when you're looking at the plan itself, **you can't understand anything in it** [...] has she read the Constitution? Knows about the Tenth Amendment and States' Rights? (seg.1)

The graphic elements featured during this exchange provide additional insight into how negative other-presentation is achieved on the show. Any inherent ambiguity (created by unspecific "the people" and "they") is addressed by the chyron banner that reads "COLLEGE CAMPUSES & THE OCASIO-CORTEZ EFFECT" and is reinforced by a slideshow of numerous

⁵ In segment 5, after showing a clip of an Instagram video of Ocasio-Cortez, Carlson laughs and states: "Huh? Even adjusting for the fact she's dumb [...] it's still confusing. What is she saying?"

OTS graphics featuring Ocasio-Cortez.⁶ Thus, the “recognizable syndrome” to which Carlson refers is cast as “the Ocasio-Cortez effect”: the Representative is “the most self-confident” but knows “the least.” In addition to alleging that she lacks both criticality and depth in her argumentation, the pundit questions whether the Congressperson has “read the Constitution” thereby suggesting that she is not well-versed with—or ignorant of—the founding document of the US. Lastly, the title of the segment on YouTube, “Professor explains ‘the Ocasio-Cortez effect’ on campuses,” associates the Representative with university students.

Indeed, repeated reference to Ocasio-Cortez’s age is another way in which doubt is cast on her legitimate authority, albeit less explicitly, as in the following:

- (8) Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is **the youngest member of Congress. She turned 30 just a couple of weeks ago. She’s barely old enough to rent a car** and yet already she’s one of the most powerful politicians in America. (TC, seg.6)

The description in (8) may sound positive—she achieved so much at a young age—but, in a domain in which (political) experience has traditionally been the cornerstone for success, the mention of being “barely old enough to rent a car” is damaging and demeaning for a Representative. Example (8) also contains an overstatement, since the minimum age to rent a car in the US is 21 (for most vehicles) and Ocasio-Cortez was 30 years old when the segment aired. Further evidence of how the Representative’s young age is occasioned occurred in example (9), from segment 3, in which Carlson describes a town hall event on the Green New Deal featuring Ocasio-Cortez on MSNBC, a network favored by a liberal, left-leaning audience:

- (9) The very same news outlet that spent two years lying to you about Russia **brings you a 29-year-old former bartender to teach you about science.** (TC, seg.3)

If, as Van Leeuwen (2007) holds, legitimation occurs through ‘authorization’ in terms of status, role or expertise that are brought to the immediate context, then with example (9) Carlson delegitimizes the Representative’s standpoint (on climate change) first by suggesting that the news outlet on which she was aired is untrustworthy and then by indexing her age concomitant with her experience as a bartender. Thus, Ocasio-Cortez lacks the expertise and experience to speak about the environment.

Ad hominem attacks against the Representative also transpire in segment 4, in which Carlson and his guest Mark Steyn discuss Ocasio-Cortez’s use of non-standard English structures and

⁶ Notably, segment 1 features eleven OTS images of Ocasio-Cortez, more than any other segment.

accent during a speech at Reverend Sharpton's *National Action Network*:⁷

- (10) Ocasio-Cortez says she's from the Bronx and she's always spoken that way. She says it was code-switching and that her normal day-to-day voice is the fake one [laughs]. (TC, seg.4)

Carlson displays a disaffiliative stance towards the reason that Ocasio-Cortez provides for using non-standard features—or being “from the Bronx” (within which are embedded references to ethnicity, class, and birthplace)—with his laughter. When Ocasio-Cortez's speech is subsequently juxtaposed with a 2007 video of Hillary Clinton in Alabama in which she recites lines of the song “I don't feel no ways tired,” the *TCT* guest retorts “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez [...] is doing it with a much lighter touch than Hillary Clinton” before adding:

- (11) She's a **young woman** and like she's **goofing around with that crowd**. For Hillary, [...] it actually says something appalling about our permanent political class (MS, seg.4)

Thus, “goofing around” is allowed of “young woman” Ocasio-Cortez whom, the pundit suggests, sits, unlike Clinton, outside of the ranks of “our permanent political class.” In addition to framing Ocasio-Cortez as young and inexperienced, this stance is also characterized by covert racial undertones. Firstly, the Congressperson's race is never explicitly acknowledged but only alluded to (e.g. “the Bronx,” “lighter touch”) in the conversation between Carlson and Steyn, which serves as a mitigation strategy. Then, the Congressperson is delivering a talk to an audience and is, therefore, performing a professional duty. By stating instead that she is “goofing around with that crowd,” the pundit evokes a portrayal of Latinx as festive, laid-back or easygoing that, as Hill (1998) maintains, reinforces covert racist meanings coupled with Spanish speakers in the United States.

Another identity facet on which *TCT* coverage pivots to negatively represent and delegitimize Ocasio-Cortez is her marital and childless status, as exhibited in the following examples:

- (12) First we're gonna consider AOC's views on children. **She doesn't have any** (TC, seg.2)
- (13) If [you...] realized that actually some **unmarried** 29-year-old member of Congress probably should be in charge of your childbearing decisions [...] ⁸ (TC, seg.2)

⁷ The excerpts were: “The fight's been long **y'all** [...] This is what organizing looks like **li:ke**, this is what building power looks like **li:ke** [...] I'm proud to be a bartender, **ain't** nothing wrong with that.”

⁸ The context of this sarcastic statement is provided in Table 3.

- (14) How does a member of Congress who hasn't yet turned thirty, **someone who has never even raised children** get the right to lecture me about morality? (TC, seg.3)

These statuses are drawn on as resources that often co-occur with her age and with matters concerning children and her moral judgement. The latter in particular supports findings reported in Stalsburn (2010) on the political consequences of being a parent: “childless women lose their gender advantage on compassion issues,” and that, “while men are advantaged by having no children, women are penalized” (Stalsburn 2010, 387). It is safe to presume that the argumentation based on gender role expectations used on *TCT* would not be employed to describe a male politician and that this use of gender role expectations is indicative of an underlying RWP gendered ideology. As Wodak finds, in American RWP, “women as care-takers and as mothers are foregrounded, firmly repositioned in their traditional gender roles” (Wodak 2015, 174). In this light, the Representative's unmarried and non-parent status defies family values.

On *TCT*, Ocasio-Cortez's credibility is challenged not due to the tenuousness of her policies and proposed legislation but on the grounds that she is a member of ‘the elite’ and is dumb, arrogant, young, inexperienced, non-serious, and in violation of gender role expectations (*argumentum ad hominem*) (Reisigl and Wodak 2001). Using ironic formulations, negatively connoted anthroponyms and debasing attributions, across the six segments, *TCT* attempts to both undermine the Representative's legitimacy on the grounds that she lacks ‘authorization’ (Van Leeuwen 2007) and perpetuate the notion that is unprepared, unfit and unsuited for office. In so doing, Carlson and his *TCT* guests attempt to convince the audience that the standpoint of the Representative, who is neither competent nor qualified, should be neither respected nor revered (Wodak 2015).

3.2 The Recontextualization of Representative Ocasio-Cortez on TCT

This section explores how Ocasio-Cortez is represented in terms of the content that triggers her coverage and how her words are recontextualized within *TCT*. In the interest of space, it centers on selected examples from segment 2, the most viewed segment. In order to provide more insights, this section includes additional transcription conventions: brackets denote embodied practices, (.) indicates pauses, and stressed words are underlined.

The host begins segment 2 by citing a recent poll that suggested more New Yorkers disliked than liked the Representative and her Twitter response to these results. Her original tweet (left column, Table 2) posted on 18/01/2019 was a reply to a tweet authored by David Atkins stating:

“It’s interesting to see centrists suddenly downplay or ignore the effects of racism, sexism and Fox News targeting when discussing @AOC’s overall approval ratings.”

Original quotation by Ocasio-Cortez	Recontextualization on <i>TCT</i>
<p>AOC: When “centrists” care more about the GOP base than the Dem base, bigotry gets legitimized. This is *the* playbook. GOP does it w/ virtually every Dem figure who isn’t a white male: otherize, demonize + splinter. It’s vital that we adapt & dismantle this approach, not cow to it.</p>	<p>TC: [brows furrowed] How did someone who’s been in Congress only a few months turn <u>off</u> so many people and so quickly? The Congresswoman has a ready answer for that as she does for most things. As she explained on Twitter, Republicans working in concert with that <u>dastardly Fox News</u> [adopts second-party voice], quote, <u>authorize</u> and [smirks, raises eyebrows] <u>demonize</u> anyone who isn’t, quote, a white <u>male</u>. In other words, it’s bigotry pure and simple. Those may look like bad poll numbers, what they <u>really</u> are is racism. Now, it’s possible you will <u>scoff</u> at this explanation. It is whiny and predictable and totally self-serving. It’s also unsupported by evidence.</p>

Tab. 2: Response to poll numbers

A comparison of the contents of Ocasio-Cortez’s tweet and its recontextualization on *TCT* (right column, Table 2) reveals similarities: both refer to a system of (legitimization of) bigotry by Republicans that targets non-white male Democrats. However, there are important changes in terms of the recontextualization principles of additions, presence, and abstraction (Fairclough 2003). Carlson’s facial expressions are additions that serve as visual cues to negative evaluations: his furrowed brows transmit skeptical disdain, his second-party voice mocks, and his smirk and raised eyebrows cast doubt on the seriousness of the accusations. Then, while sexism—included in both Atkins’ tweet and inherent in the genderonym “male”—is backgrounded in Carlson’s response (where racism is explicitly stated), the host’s commentary is imbued with gendered language. He suggests that the Representative talks too much, a trait attributed to women more so than to men, and in the evaluation of the tweet, Carlson uses the term “whiny,” a pejorative adjective associated with the dangerous talk of women seldom applied to men (Ferguson 2000). By directly citing only selected words and presenting the tweet with negative evaluations, the *TCT* host reframes the original quotations from a call to action to dismantle a racist and sexist system to Ocasio-Cortez’s “whiny,” “predictable,” “totally self-serving,” and “unsupported” argumentation for her unpopularity.

Subsequent to this description, Tucker Carlson presents what he calls a ‘litmus test’ for the souls of his viewers based on whether they agree with what Ocasio-Cortez says in a series of brief aired excerpts of her interviews and posts. The first is a clip of a video Ocasio-Cortez posted on her Instagram account on 24/02/2019 (Table 3), which begins with a conditional sentence in which a bleak image of the future—or planetary disaster—is projected to skew the opinion of

viewers in favor of reform.⁹ By employing this linguistic structure and citing ominous consequences, the Representative uses the strategy of legitimization through a hypothetical future (Reyes 2011) to appeal to viewers’ emotions, justify immediate action, and ultimately legitimize her proposed legislation, namely the Green New Deal.

Original quotation by Ocasio-Cortez	Recontextualization on <i>TCT</i>
<p>AOC: Our planet is going to be a disaster if we don't turn this ship around and so it's basically like there's scientific consensus that the lives of children are gonna be very difficult and it <u>does lead</u>—I think— young people to (.) have a legitimate question, you know, should- (.) is it okay to still have children?</p>	<p>TC: First we're gonna consider AOC's views on children. She doesn't <u>have</u> any and there's a reason for that: [brows furrowed] she <u>cares</u> too much. [brows raised] Her <u>heart</u> is too big. Watch her explain: [video excerpt aired] TC: [brows furrowed] Is it okay to still have children? That is AOC's question to you. Now if you answered: 'are you <u>kidding</u>? Of <u>course</u> it's okay to have children. And, by the way, back off you authoritarian creep. How many kids I have is none of your business.'</p>

Tab. 3: Climate change

In spite of, and arguably because of, this excerpt’s aims, no mention of climate change transpires in its recontextualization on *TCT*. This omission is likely ideologically- and/or politically-grounded because both RWP parties and their supporters (Lockwood 2018) and American conservatives and Republicans (McCright and Dunlap 2011) are more likely to be climate skeptics and hostile towards a policy that addresses climate change. Instead, the introduction to the video redefines the topic to the Representative’s “views on children.” By specifying that the Representative “doesn’t have any” children, Carlson adds personal information missing in the original quotation and denies her the ‘female advantage’ on child-care and children’s issues held by female politicians who are mothers (Stalsberg 2010). Then, the original question, preceded by the mitigating “I think,” the hedge “you know” and the self-initiated repair, is reframed from a rhetorical device to a directed question to the *TCT* audience. The omission of references to climate change legislation and the literal interpretation of her question presents a distorted picture of Ocasio-Cortez’s standpoint, or a ‘straw man fallacy’ (Reisigl and Wodak 2001), which provides Carlson with the opportunity to make her standpoint less tenable and to position Ocasio-Cortez as an authoritarian threat to individual freedom.

The third recontextualized quotation under study, the last excerpt aired in segment 2, is an excerpt of an 08/01/2019 MSNBC interview with Rachel Maddow:

⁹ The Congressperson employs a similar technique in another excerpt cited in segment 1 from a 22/01/2019 interview, in which she states: “The world is going to end in 12 years if we don’t address climate change [...] this is our World War II.”

Original quotation by Ocasio-Cortez	Recontextualization on <i>TCT</i>
AOC: Those women and children trying to come here with nothing but the shirts on their back to <u>create</u> an opportunity and to <u>provide</u> for this nation are acting more in the American tradition [nodding] than this President is right now.	TC: This one's about immigration: [video excerpt aired] TC: So the question is: [brows furrowed] ' <u>who</u> is more American? [eyebrows raised] <u>Actual</u> Americans or <u>foreigners</u> who spit on our customs and mock our laws by sneaking into our country illegally and calling us racist if we try to make them leave?'

Tab. 4: Climate change 1

Both the original quotation and its recontextualization describe immigrants and create dichotomies, but they are pointedly distinct: ‘immigrants’ *versus* ‘the President’ in the former, and ‘actual Americans’ *versus* ‘foreigners’ in the latter. In addition to a change in the arrangement of elements which places “Americans” in the foreground (Fairclough 2003), in Carlson’s rendition, the President becomes all Americans, which may be interpreted as a metonymical extension but certainly assigns it a new anti-American meaning: ‘immigrants’/‘President’ becomes ‘immigrants’/‘Americans.’ Moreover, Ocasio-Cortez’s statement, an emotional appeal to the plight of immigrants, is characterized by moves of positive other-representation indicative of anti-racist ideological talk (Van Dijk 2000) while in its recontextualization on *TCT* is reframed within the mental models prejudiced people have about immigrants and employs negative other-representation strategies (Van Dijk 2000). Immigrants are described *via* predicational identification in terms of negative prejudiced criminalization (“mock our laws,” “sneaking into our country illegally”), incivility (“spit on our customs”), and bigotry (“calling us racist”). The Representative and Carlson use similar argumentation moves and appeal to the viewers’ emotions by “starkly emphasizing the situation of those they speak for” (Van Dijk 2000, 111), but the former seeks sympathy for immigrants while the latter solicits protection of “our” customs, laws, and integrity.

As fragments of Ocasio-Cortez’s discourse were moved from their original context into the *TCT* context, elements of the original text were rearranged and abstracted, included and excluded, foregrounded, and backgrounded. On *TCT*, Ocasio Cortez’s underlying anti-administration, environmentalist and anti-racist ideology was either reframed or outright omitted, and, by performing a ‘straw man fallacy’ (Reisigl and Wodak 2001), Carlson positioned the Representative as whiny, authoritarian, and anti-American.

3.3 Reframing racism

This section homes in on the way in which the framing of racism is shifted and renegotiated across *TCT* segments, and how Ocasio-Cortez is used as a resource to do so.

As Van Dijk (2013, 183) affirms, in ideological discourse, “negative topics about Us (such as our racism and prejudice) are typically mitigated or ignored, and hence seldom reach (important) topic status.” In this vein, on *TCT*, racism against non-whites is often presented by means of the discursive strategies of trivialization and mitigation. Consider the following:

- (15) A cynical excuse for personal failings, one we’ve heard a million times from politicians— [adopts second-party voice] ‘racism!’ (TC, seg.2)
- (16) It’s getting hard to keep track of all things that are racist these days: Jefferson statues, milk, not wanting African Americans to abort their children—that’s racist. Now add another one to the long list: cauliflower is racist. (TC, seg.5)

The constructions in both examples trivialize racism by suggesting that it is a groundless justification excessively used by politicians and a hackneyed label that is randomly applied. A closer look at segment 5, devoted to Ocasio-Cortez’s invitation via Instagram to defy a “colonial approach to environmentalism” and grow vegetables indigenous to the United States (e.g., yucca instead of cauliflower) in urban gardens, provides further details. In the segment, Carlson enacts a jocular frame, characterized at once by provocation and playfulness, not only by labeling the innocuous cauliflower as racist as illustrated in example (16) but also by the OTS graphic that accompanies the utterance (Figure 1). In its risible pictorial depiction of an angry cauliflower surrounded by flames and the capitalized phrase “RACIST CAULIFLOWER,” the nonseriousness of (accusations of) racism is both embodied and reinforced.



Fig. 1: OTS graphic at the start of *TCT* segment 5

Another trivializing approach taken on *TCT* with respect to racism against non-whites involves equating the term *racist* with a host of negative attributes. In segment 2, already treated at

length in the previous section, this strategy is elucidated when Carlson enacts irony as a frame in his explanation of the rules of the ‘litmus test’ that he presents to his audience:

- (17) It’s simple: when you agree with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez you are a good person. When you disagree with her, you are not. **You are a racist, a bigot, a hater, a loathsome human being.** (TC, seg.2)

As discussed previously, Ocasio-Cortez’s standpoints were not all closely connected to race issues, and a ‘racist’ charge is ill-suited to describe, for instance, a climate change skeptic. Earlier, we discussed this dichotomy in terms of cognitive mobilization (Mudde 2004), but critical race theory can shed new light. In her acclaimed work *White Fragility*, DiAngelo (2019) describes a mutually exclusive view on racism that maps onto the false binary “racism = bad” and “not racist = good,” which has pertinent consequences:

Within this paradigm, to suggest that I am racist is to deliver a deep moral blow—a kind of character assassination. Having received this blow, I must defend my character, and that is where all my energy will go—to deflecting the charge, rather than reflecting on my behavior. (DiAngelo 2019, 72)

This type of behavior emerges in segment 3 when Tucker Carlson comments (19) on an interview excerpt in which Ocasio-Cortez responds to being positioned as a member of the “Tea Party of the Left” (18):

- (18) [...] We are not calling anyone names. People say ‘Tea Party of the Left,’ and I find this phrase very interesting [...] because the grounding of the Tea Party was xenophobia, the underpinnings of white supremacy. (AOC, seg.3)
- (19) [laughs] Yeah, stop with the name calling you racist white supremacist xenophobe! [laughs] so it’s official: **Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is a moron. And nasty. And more self-righteous than any Televangelist who ever preached a sermon on cable access. She’s not impressive. She’s awful.** (TC, seg.3)

The string of *ad hominem* attacks that Ocasio-Cortez’s utterance occasions, striking not only in term of quantity but also in terms of breadth, serves at once to save face and to deny the accusation of racism.

In a similar light, the playful frame on racism is pointedly recast in segment 6, as is the portrayal of the Representative herself. At the start of his monologue, Carlson ascribes to her the positive evaluations “famous,” “influential,” and “impressive” (versus “not impressive” in example 19) and *TCT* features the only instance in which the Representative’s full name is used

in a chyron, before presenting evidence to support the claim that she is “an unapologetic bigot.” First, during her primary campaign against her (white, male) opponent, Carlson explains that Ocasio-Cortez “didn’t run from” the accusation of making the election about race but said, “it is about race.” Even though this four-word citation is extracted from a response that listed race into a broader set of sociopolitical and economic issues that interest her constituency,¹⁰ Carlson declares:

- (20) Not so long ago a campaign like that would have been considered deeply immoral. The press would have hounded Ocasio-Cortez until she would have apologized or dropped out, but not anymore. Our ruling class no longer recognizes universal standards of any kind. (TC, seg.6)

Second, *TCT* airs a video of the Representative participating in a subcommittee hearing—the only excerpt from an official government function—in which Ocasio-Cortez asks Dr. Mustafa Ali, the Vice President of the Environmental Justice, Climate, and Community Revitalization, whether people of color are bearing the brunt of climate change and whether those responsible for the most significant amount of emissions “tend to be predominantly white.” Although Dr. Ali’s affirmative response is congruent with recent research (see Bozeman, Bozeman and Theis 2020), Carlson responds by affirming “it’s hard to think of anyone in American life say anything that disgusting and foolish and dangerous,” and added:

- (21) No one seemed to even notice when Ocasio-Cortez said that in the middle of the Congressional hearing. Our rulers? Acted like it was all totally normal because increasingly for them it is normal. This is ominous development for this country. Talk like this will destroy us. (TC, seg.6)

This segment is characterized by a complete reframing not only of racism, which is no longer dismissed or ridiculed but also of the Representative who, no longer delegitimized as inexperienced, is placed on a par with the Commander-in-Chief as a “Divider-in-Chief” in the OTS graphic at the end of the segment (Figure 2).

¹⁰ The response is excerpted from a 27/06/2018 post-nomination *Intercept* interview: “You know, people in the opposite camp have been saying, ‘She’s making this about race.’ And, you know what? It is about race. And it is about education. And it is about our incomes. And it is about wealth inequality. Because this campaign is about our issues.”



Fig. 2: OTS graphic at the end of *TCT* segment 6

When racism is perceived as against whites, as occurred in segment 6, the perpetrator (Ocasio-Cortez) is accused of race-baiting and of dividing the nation. Her utterances become dangerous. Carlson accuses ‘the elite’ (“the press,” “our ruling class,” “our rulers”) of negligence for not condemning the Representative for her “deeply immoral” campaign and talk that “will destroy us” (examples 20 and 21). Thus, here, Ocasio-Cortez is once again positioned outside of the ruling class. Instead, a horizontal exclusion of ‘the people’ *versus* ‘dangerous others’ (March 2017) is created in which Ocasio-Cortez assumes the latter space.

Conclusions

From the analysis of the coverage of the left-wing populist Representative Ocasio-Cortez by a political talk show hosted by a right-wing populist, several insights transpired. *TCT* delegitimized Ocasio-Cortez with ironic formulations, *ad hominem* attacks and debasing attributions that cast doubt on her authority and expertise. *TCT* drew on (at times unexpected) aspects of her identity to compromise the Representative’s credibility, question her policy acumen and the truthfulness of her affirmations, and suggest that she has neither the competences nor the experience required of members of Congress. While some of these negative evaluations match those made against the “selfish ruling class” described in Carlson’s (2018) book and are therefore in line with his attacks against ‘the elite,’ others connote ageism, sexism, and racism.

Furthermore, the recontextualization of excerpts of Ocasio-Cortez’s utterances and posts enacts a “straw man fallacy” (Reisigl and Wodak 2001) through which the Representative’s standpoints and underlying ideologies are concealed, and she is cast as whiny, authoritarian, and anti-American. The strategies enacted in the recontextualization processes allow us to gain a better

understanding of the deeper mechanisms of ideological reproduction and suppression in public and political discourse.

Lastly, a focus on racism reveals two frames applied based on who the (perceived) recipient of racism is: when it is non-whites, it is trivialized and mitigated; when it is whites, it is made serious and magnified. A shift in frames revealed explicit contradictions even across just six brief segments, such as naming the Representative as “not impressive” then “impressive,” and situating her as part of ‘the elite’ ruling class and outside of it. Indeed, this reframing results in the creation of the antagonistic opposition of ‘the people’ *versus* Ocasio-Cortez as a ‘dangerous other’ who produces divisive speech.

This study was characterized by a series of limitations, some of which should be addressed in future research. One limitation was the number of segments under study. Future research should expand the analysis to all mentions of the Representative on the broadcast show selected as well as others on the network since a comparison across news networks might usefully reveal differences in the discursive strategies used to position political opponents by Fox News shows that align with RWP to different extents. Also, this paper provided a brief discussion of embodied practices on *TCT* in a single subsection due to space constraints but all social actors, and Tucker Carlson in particular, transmit a lot *via* facial expressions so further consideration of (at least) these nonverbal cues would be fruitful.

The *TCT* segments analyzed in this study were posted on YouTube, a platform that encourages user-mediated interaction, and the analysis of the comments inserted in response to these segments can provide insights into the uptake of the messages imparted on the show. For instance, Table 5 depicts a randomized sample of YouTube comments to the most viewed segment (2), that contain the third most frequent four-word lexical bundle, “she opens her mouth.”¹¹ These three examples alone echo the language used on *TCT* to describe Representative Ocasio-Cortez in terms of deficiencies in intellect, knowledge or experience (“low intelligence;” “ignorant;” “clueless”) or the fact that she does not belong in Congress (“go back to mixing margaritas”) and also suggest overt sexism and covert racism.

¹¹ The 13806 YouTube comments (replies excluded) were collected in March 2020 and resulted in a 325567-token corpus. Table 5 was produced with the “get a random sample” of the concordance SketchEngine function for the 4-gram “she opens her mouth,” which was the most frequent after “don’t like her,” and “I don’t like.”

She's pretty fine until	she opens her mouth	. Fortunately for me, and all other men, there IS something we can do about that.
Every time	she opens her mouth	, she removes all doubt of her low intelligence. Please, AOC, go back to mixing margaritas!
She is kind of hot, until	she opens her mouth	. Not knowing when to zip it and move on, is a clear sign of being clueless and ignorant.

Tab. 5: Examples of concordances of the 4-gram 'she opens her mouth' in YouTube comments to *TCT* segment 2

The information provided in Table 5 is partial, but its aim was to incite further research on the processes that govern the uptake of and response to the messages disseminated within political discourse such as *TCT* using the unique possibility that social media provide.

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